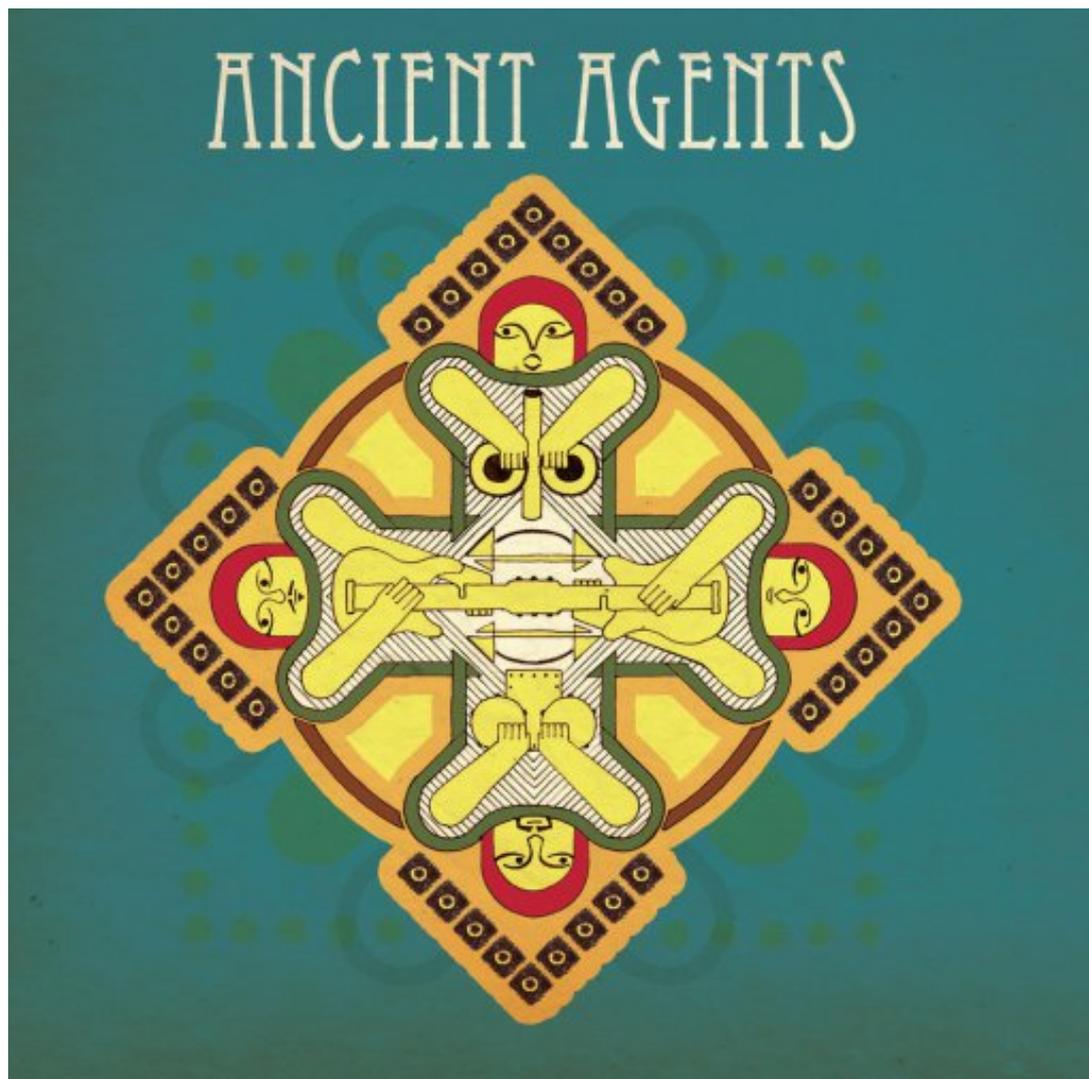


Ancient Agents: joyous music from everywhere

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You wouldn't know it from almost nonexistent press coverage, but this decade is turning into one of the richest and most beautiful for new South African jazz. Alongside original ideas and visions, technical proficiency is high, thanks to improved (though still not ideal) access to music education. And doors and minds are open for all kinds of intriguing collaborations: across genres, continents – and generations, so that, for example, veteran South African giants such as Louis Moholo-Moholo, Thebe Lepere and Kaya Mahlangu can share stages with relative youngsters such as Mandla Mlangeni. (Late October, if you want to catch that one in Joburg.)



Another, equally intriguing collaboration is Ancient Agents, whose self-titled album (<https://ancientagents.bandcamp.com/>) launches on Sept 21 at the Orbit in Johannesburg, with other launch gigs scheduled. The quartet comprises tabla, didgeridoo and percussion player Ronan Skillen, guitarist Reza Khota and bassist Schalk Joubert alongside a Swede, Fredrik Gille, on frame-drum and the Afro-Peruvian box-drum: the *cajon*.

The album describes its sound as “richly textured acoustic world beat” but while that’s not inaccurate, it doesn’t tell half the story.

With so much percussion on board, many on the nine tracks are unsurprisingly groove-led for some part of their existence, but those grooves are dazzlingly varied: from the lilting Zimbabwe-style patterns of the opener, *Clouseau’s*

Dream (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uEX1TPqIN4w>), to tabla *tals*, to rhythms that wouldn’t be out of place on a Cape Town club dancefloor. The strings run a similar gamut: Joubert’s bass can walk, skank – and solo; Khota’s guitar can soar on wings of echoey effect, chime like bells, or get down equally dancefloor dirty. Sometimes that all happens in the life of a single number: *Unearth* starts somewhere that might be the Kalakuta Republic, segues into tough jazz impro, and then travels East. This isn’t the kind of ‘worldbeat’ that trances you to sleep – rather, its intricacy and variety compel careful listening. And because each player has mastered and owns the idioms of his instrument, the eclecticism unfolds in a way that feels natural and joyous, without even a whiff of pastiche.

The joy and fun in the music are important too. Groove-led music can sometimes feel relentless even as it drives your feet to tap. By contrast, Ancient Agents’ tracks, such as the appealing little folk tune *Bokmakierie* or the closer, *You’re the Reason*, are also just so damn pretty.



Ancient Agents in performance

Music-collectors aware of a Tananas-shaped gap in their current collection would do well to give Ancient Agents the digital equivalent of a spin. It doesn't sound 'like' Tananas – those players were, and these players are, such distinctive individual voices that would be impossible. But it lives in the same soundscape: a territory that has abolished musical border-posts, but is deeply grounded in and respectful of different musical legacies; a place that's simultaneously nowhere and everywhere.